

Southerners in Blue: They Defied the Confederacy

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Review

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Umphrey, Don *Southerners in Blue: They Defied the Confederacy*. Quarry Press, \$24.95 ISBN 820320463

Wanting No Part in War

Men from Northern Alabama were forced to make difficult choices

Southerners in Blue is an intimate history of a small group of Unionist families in Civil War Winston County. Located in northwest Alabama, Winston was part of a cluster of counties that exhibited considerable dissatisfaction with or outright opposition to Confederate rule. As Umphrey shows, the Civil War in this region was a highly personal conflict that profoundly transformed the lives of nearly all residents, whether Unionist or secessionist, male or female, old or young. Umphrey's work strays considerably from the methodology of traditional history, for the work is written largely in the style of a novel, and Umphrey liberally reconstructs not only conversations among the central characters but also numerous other details of their lives. Many readers may find these elements unsatisfactory, even unacceptable, but Umphrey's intent was to write a history accessible to a wide range of readers, and he is successful.

Antebellum northwest Alabama was in many ways far removed from the Black Belt regions of the Deep South. An area of hilly terrain and sandy soil, it grew little cotton, employed few slaves, and exhibited sometimes considerable economic, social, political, and cultural differences from the rest of the state. In 1860 Winston County had the lowest per-capita wealth and the fewest slaves of any county in Alabama. Though he does not pursue the point, Umphrey suggests that these social and economic differences were at the root of this area's Unionism, and most of the central figures in this work were men who worked their own small farms and who were indifferent, or even outright opposed, to slavery.

Secession found limited support in Winston County. In February 1862, when the war was nearly a year old, over two thousand men from this region met in a convention in Winston. This convention issued a statement declaring secession illegal and proclaiming Winston County neutral. This dissent likely resulted as much from indifference to Southern grievances and dissatisfaction with the Confederate government as from an ideological commitment to the Union, for many residents simply wanted to be left alone. Neutrality, however, was not an option, and war came to northwest Alabama. Conscription, more than any other factor, brought the conflict home, for as the South's manpower needs increased, enrolling officers pursued their duties with increasing determination. Backed occasionally by Confederate troops and sometimes by Home Guard units, they systematically went farm to farm and house to house searching for all available men. Residents opposed to the Confederate cause faced an agonizing choice among three equally poor options: abandon their principles and accede to Confederate pressure; hide out and attempt to avoid Confederate authorities; or make a long and difficult trip to Union lines to fight with the Federal forces. Each choice carried a high price and involved numerous risks.

The central characters in Umphrey's work are John and Mahala Phillips, a young couple who moved to Alabama from Cherokee County, North Carolina in 1859. Ideologically opposed not only to secession but also to slavery, John endeavored to stay clear of local authorities and avoid any involvement in the conflict. When that no longer proved possible, he and a younger neighbor attempted the dangerous trek to Union lines in Mississippi, but the trip proved too difficult and they returned home. They then hid for a time near their homes, but John was eventually captured. Forced to enlist, he served with the Fifth Alabama Cavalry for a few months. He constantly sought an opportunity to escape, but when that failed he eventually feigned sickness and deserted. John then returned home and joined a large group of Unionists who had taken refuge at a large rock shelter in Winston County. Finally, when a recruiter from the First Alabama Cavalry (Union) reached Winston County, and Phillips and over one hundred other men enlisted.

For the remainder of the work, Umphrey alternates between the experiences of Phillips and his neighbors in the Union military, and the difficulties of their families at home. Like other Civil War soldiers, the men of the First Alabama endured numerous hardships, including grueling marches, long weeks in camp, boredom, debilitating and sometimes fatal diseases, incompetent officers, and defeat in battle. Meanwhile, their families faced increasingly difficult conditions.

Preyed upon by both Confederate foraging parties and Union raiders, and threatened by Confederate Home Guard units and outlaws, they struggled to defend themselves, preserve their dwindling food supplies, and endure endless months of fear, loneliness, and uncertainty. Umphrey also includes a grim story of a small group of men from the First Alabama Cavalry that was captured and eventually confined in Andersonville.

Umphrey's work differs from other recent works on the Civil War in Southern Appalachia in a number of ways. The book lacks the detailed social and economic research and rigorous analysis that has come to characterize Southern Appalachian scholarship and it makes little attempt to identify the sources of Union sentiment or relate socio-economic characteristics to loyalties. It also exhibits limited awareness of the relevant scholarship on Southern Appalachia, and overlooks the many similarities between the war in northern Alabama and internal conflicts in other parts of the Confederacy. In part, these differences result from Umphrey's particular purposes and approach and should not be considered defects. A greater recognition of the context of the war in this area, however, would have given Umphrey's work the perspective it sometimes lacks.

On the other side, Umphrey's intensely personalized approach provides a valuable view of the war that is frequently lacking in more scholarly studies. The strength of Umphrey's work is its unusually vivid, convincing, and detailed account of the experiences of ordinary men, women, and children caught in a war they never wanted but could not avoid. Umphrey makes real to the reader the anguish of separation between husbands and wives, the constant fear of violence suffered by families left at home, the endurance of grinding hardships, the agonizing choices that those who had opposed the breakup of the old Union were now forced to make, and the enmity between neighbors. Umphrey reminds us that Civil War history is as much the story of small decisions, actions and sufferings as well as great.

Noel Fisher is the author of War at every door: Partisan Politics and Guerrilla Violence in East Tennessee, 1861-1867 (1997). Winner of the 1997 Seaborg Award, he is an independent scholar and lives in Columbus, Ohio.